

The California Mission Book and Art Preservation Project

Laura Stalker/Steven Hackel

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We are writing today about a fascinating and important project related to the history of California in particular and, in a larger sense, the early modern world as it came to California. Our working name for this endeavor is “The California Mission Book Preservation Project.” As you know, between 1769 and 1823 Franciscan missionaries established 21 missions in coastal California. While generations of scholars have studied the missionaries, the buildings of the missions, and the lives of Indians in the missions, the libraries and books of the missions have escaped scholarly study. Books were an extremely important aspect of daily life at the missions. They guided the padres in the administration of the sacraments, they instructed them in their dealings with Native Californians, they shaped the sermons that the missionaries delivered from the pulpit, and they served as a medium through which Enlightenment ideas were introduced into California. Thus, the missions’ books constitute an unparalleled record of not only the religious currents and ideals that led to the creation of the California missions but the new, challenging, and often difficult world into which Native Californians ventured when they came to the missions of California.

Despite their importance the books missionaries brought to California have often fallen victim to theft, the elements, and neglect. While some mission-era books have been consolidated in the larger repositories of the Santa Barbara Mission Archive-Library or the holdings of the Archive of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, nearly every mission still has remnants of an earlier library that dates to the years of its establishment. These small (50 to 300 volumes on average at most missions) but irreplaceable colonial libraries are terribly endangered.

Since 2011 we have been pursuing avenues to proceed with a pilot project at Mission San Gabriel that would allow us to explore a larger project that would allow for the protection of the endangered libraries of all of the California missions. We bring to this project a set of complementary skills and the expertise necessary for this project and thus we are confident that we could administer it. Laura Stalker, Avery Deputy Director of the Huntington Library, is a leader in the field of book history, library management, and the conservation of books and libraries, and she has the skills and experience with large-scale bibliographic canvasses such that she can envision a database that would allow us to capture the key elements of the books in mission libraries. As a long-term researcher in the field of colonial California and Professor of History at UC Riverside Steven Hackel is deeply familiar with many of the books that the Franciscans brought to California. And over the past decades he has developed good working relationships with the Catholic Church and the curators of numerous California missions. He is currently on an advisory board for the California Council of Bishops, and part of their work is to inventory and preserve the cultural patrimony of the missions. Hackel also serves as a member of the advisory board for the museum at Mission San Gabriel.

In the past few years we have approached Mission San Gabriel, the Santa Barbara Mission Archive-Library, and the archive of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles with a proposal for a study of mission books. Our ideas have been warmly received by their directors and curators, and we believe that we have the institutional partners that we need to move forward. This initiative is timely as 2019 marks the 250th anniversary of Spanish settlement in California and in 2021 Mission San Gabriel will observe the 250th anniversary of its founding. We think that this moment therefore is an especially appropriate one in which to launch an important initiative to inventory and preserve the books of the California missions.

The first step would be a small pilot project at Mission San Gabriel. The core of our idea is simple on the surface – to create a comprehensive inventory of the mission books, followed by a preservation survey. Such an inventory, database, and eventual union catalog across the missions, could be used both as a scholarly resource and as a collection management tool. The initial preservation survey could form the basis of mission-specific preservation plans and fundraising efforts. The database could be built with a spatiotemporal dimension to display the location and movement of books among the missions. Experts might identify items of particular value that merit heightened levels of care, such as owner ship marks from various missionaries. From this foundation other projects would naturally grow, including projects for students in book history, library science, and conservation programs.

In sum, our goals would be to 1) protect the book holdings of the mission libraries against theft and loss by creating a comprehensive inventory and database; 2) identify items of particular value or interest for heightened security and preservation measures; 3) perform professional preservation surveys and create reports that can be used as the basis for individual preservation plans, and 4) make the inventory available to scholars for more intensive study of the mission holdings.

What we now seek is a small startup grant to embark on our pilot project at Mission San Gabriel where we would develop and test the methodologies of collecting and recording the condition and various metadata of the historic books of the mission. We will volunteer our time on this initial pilot project, but what we need now is a small grant to hire the staff necessary to get this pilot project off the ground and completed over the next few months.

We believe that an initial grant of \$10,000 would allow us to purchase a laptop necessary for the project, develop and test the database, and hire a conservation expert to inventory the books of Mission San Gabriel.

We would very much enjoy the opportunity to talk with you about this timely and important project. Our sense is that it reflects the the vision of the Dan Murphy Foundation.

Sincerely,

Laura Stalker

Steven Hackel